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Few remarks on the commemorative practices related to the history of Jews and the Holocaust on the example of Minsk, Odessa and Warsaw

The main purpose of this essay is to compare commemorative practices related to the history of the Jewish population and the Holocaust in three cities of the former Eastern Bloc: Minsk, Odessa and Warsaw. Before World War II, all three cities were important multinational centers, with a large Jewish community in each of them. Jews participated in all spheres of social, political and cultural life. Today, in these three cities, we can find synagogues, Jewish cemeteries, museums and exhibitions, memorials, monuments, and even Jewish schools. A long road however led to this.

Cemeteries

The "Dynamo" stadium in Minsk is located in the place of the oldest Jewish cemetery in the city, where burials were carried out since the 16th century. In 1934, during the construction of the stadium, the graves were destroyed, and the remains have been removed as "waste". Stone monuments have been reused for other building. Today the majority of Minsk residents cannot imagine that just a hundred years ago there were graves of Jews on the site of the popular "Dynamo" stadium. The oldest cemetery in Odessa has been destroyed as well by the Soviet authorities in the 1930s (only the remains of the gate remained).

The Holocaust led to the extermination of the Jewish population of Minsk, Odessa and Warsaw. After the war, places associated with Jewish culture and history were forgotten. Both Jewish cemeteries in Warsaw, founded in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, were badly damaged during the Second World War. Their fate in the post-war years was different: at the Bródno Cemetery, the authorities liquidated the remaining gravestones, partially using them as building material. The area was planted with trees as there was a plan to set up a park in this place; however, a park was never finished. The cemetery on Wola was also under threat: it was planned to build a street through its territory, which would lead to the destruction of most of the gravestones. This, however, did not happen, because after 1945, the dead still were buried in this cemetery.

In Odessa, in 1945, the Third Jewish Cemetery was opened, which is called by the inhabitants of Odessa "Happy Journey". Today it has about fifty thousand graves. It was here that the memorial to the victims of the pogrom of 1905, the graves of Odessa rabbis of the early 20th century, and some private burials from the destroyed Second Cemetery were replaced. In the 1950s, the authorities banned further burials at the Second Cemetery, founded in the 19th century, and then it was completely destroyed – nowadays there are only small green square and the restored gate.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Jewish cemeteries in Warsaw experienced a renaissance thanks to the efforts of the Nissenbaum Family Foundation, whose main task is to preserve traces of Jewish culture in Poland. Later, the Jewish community of Warsaw (gmina) and the municipal authorities have been also involved in the restoration work. At the Bródno

Cemetery, about three thousand graves were restored, while the Wola Cemetery officially today counts two hundred thousand graves. Over the last three decades, cemeteries have become important places of Jewish memory on the map not only of Warsaw, but also of Poland.

On the site of one of the Minsk cemeteries in 1961, the main building of the Belarusian State University was erected. Another one was located on the territory of the Minsk ghetto during the war. Now there is a public garden in its place. The cemetery was discovered accidentally in 2007 when gravestones with Hebrew inscriptions were found during construction work. The cemetery existed from 1868 to 1946, and in the early 1970s it was closed and completely liquidated in 1990. At the same time, not even memorial signs were installed. The cemetery gained fame thanks to the care of the Historical Workshop, a project of the Johannes Rau Minsk International Educational Center, within the framework of which work on preservation of the memory of the Holocaust and other events of the Second World War is conducted. Today, on the territory of the cemetery, there are monuments to those citizens of Germany, Czech Republic and Austria, who were killed in this place. In total 3000 Jews were killed their during the war.

Museums

In 2002, in Minsk, with the support of the Jews of Belarus and the Representation of the Joint, a Jewish charitable organization, the Museum of the History and Culture of the Jews of Belarus was founded. More than 10,000 exhibits are presented here. At the same time, the history of the Holocaust is reflected only in separate expositions, for example, "I am from the ghetto", "Jewish resistance in Belarus, 1941-1944 ", exhibitions dedicated to the history of the ghetto in Minsk. The history of the Holocaust is also presented in separate expositions at the Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War in Minsk.

However, the most emotional place of memory, probably due to its authenticity, is the above mentioned Historical Workshop in Minsk. It is located in the city center, in a wooden house – the only building preserved after the war on the territory of the former Minsk ghetto. It is noteworthy that for many years this building was under the threat of destruction by the city authorities in connection with the laying of a new metro line. And only thanks to the personal participation of German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier during the opening of the second stage of the Memorial Complex Trostenets, the building was sold to the Johannes Rau Minsk International Educational Center.

The Museum of the History of Polish Jews "POLIN" was opened in Warsaw on April 19, 2013, on the 70th anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. The place chosen for it was special: already in 1946, the first monument dedicated to the heroes of the uprising was erected here. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Memorial Route of the Martyrdom and the Struggle of the Jews in Warsaw appeared which consists of 17 stone blocks, 1 obelisk, 2 commemorative plaques and 1 monument. The route leads from the monument to the heroes of the Warsaw ghetto uprising (that is, the square where the Museum is located today) to the place where Umschlagplatz was located during the war – a staging point where prisoners were sorted out to be sent to death camps. It can be concluded that the memory of the uprising and the ghetto was present in the symbolic space of this part of the city. The opening of the "POLIN" Museum in 2013, dedicated to the thousand-year history of the Jews in Poland, was another important step in preserving the memory and popularizing the history of not only the Holocaust, but also the long period of common history of Poles

and Jews that preceded it. The museum has won international recognition, and in 2016 it won the prestigious "European Museum of the Year Award".

The Holocaust Museum in Odessa, created by the decision of the Odessa Regional Association of Jews – Former Prisoners of Ghetto and Nazi Concentration Camps, was opened on June 22, 2009. The date – the anniversary of the German attack on the USSR – was not chosen by chance. The author of the concept of the museum is Pavel Kozlenko, a historian, one of the leading specialists in the study of the Holocaust on the territory of the Romanian zone of occupation of Ukraine during the Second World War. The first director of the museum was a former prisoner of the ghetto in Sloboda, Viktor Sabulis. The purpose of the museum is to convey to the younger generation reliable information about the tragedy of the Jewish people in order to prevent a repetition of it in the future. What is characteristic, this is the only museum in Ukraine that covers the occupation of Ukraine by the Romanian troops of Marshal Yon Antonescu during the Second World War.

The museum carefully collects and preserves the history of the tragedy of the Holocaust on the territory of Transnistria. In five halls of the museum there are written testimonies of eyewitnesses of the Holocaust, authentic things that have survived from the beginning of the war, lists of those who were driven into the ghetto (for each house building in Odessa). All exhibits are genuine. They are dedicated to residents of Odessa – former prisoners of concentration camps and ghettos, 400 of whom were lucky enough to survive the nightmares of the Holocaust.

Monuments

An invaluable contribution to the preservation of the memory of the Holocaust in Belarus was made by the Honored Architect of the Republic of Belarus, Laureate of many awards and competitions, Academician of the International and Belarusian Academies of Architecture, Chairman of the Union of Belarusian Jewish Public Associations and Communities since 1991, Leonid Levin. He is the author of most of the monuments dedicated to the Second World War in Belarus. Among them – the monuments dedicated to the memory of the Holocaust. Probably the most famous of these monuments in Minsk is The Pit (Yama) Memorial, located in the city center at the site, where Nazis conducted the massacre of about 5,000 Jews in 1942.

For the first time, an obelisk was erected at this place in 1947. It was the first memorial to the victims of the Holocaust in the USSR, on which it was allowed to make an inscription in Yiddish: "A blessed memory for eternal times to five thousand Jews who died at the hands of the fierce enemies of mankind – the Nazi-German villains on March 2, 1942". However, the author of the monument Chaim Maltinsky, as well as and the stonecutter Mordukh Sprishen were arrested soon and sent to the camps. The reason was they wrote on the monument about the murdered Jews, and not about "peaceful Soviet citizens", which were generally accepted at that time. In 2000, on the territory of The Pit Memorial, a bronze sculptural composition "The Last Path" was installed, located along the steps leading to the center of the memorial, and representing a group of doomed martyrs descending to the bottom of the pit.

For the commemoration of the Jews who died during the Second World War, there are "alternative places" in Odessa. They are also an excellent example of the interaction of official authorities and private initiative, of cultural and communicative memory. Today,

there are several memorial complexes in the city, the main of which is located in Prokhorovsky Park in the outskirts of the city, in the place where the "road of death" of Odessa Jews and Roma to the extermination camps began in 1941. On October 17-25, 1941, more than thirty thousand of the Odessa population were shot or burned alive. In November 1941, an order was issued obliging all male Jews from 18 to 50 years old to appear in the city prison. From that day on, the entire Jewish population of the city was sent to various concentration camps set up by the Romanians in the countryside near Odessa. Later a ghetto was set up in the city itself. During the Romanian and German occupation, more than hundred thousand Ukrainian Jews who lived between the Dniester and the Southern Bug were murdered.

It was here, almost 60 years later, that the Holocaust memorial has been created. The initiator was the Jewish community of Odessa and in particular the veteran of the Second World War, the famous lawyer from Israel, honorary citizen of the city, Yakov Maniovich. A memorial sign was installed. Later, the "Alley of the Righteous of the World" was added to it with trees, each of which was planted in honor of an Odessa resident who sheltered and rescued Jews. In 2004, a monument to the victims of the Holocaust by sculptor Zurab Tsereteli was unveiled in Odessa, which completes the design of the memorial complex.

One of the most notable and interesting projects to preserve the memory of Jews in the urban space of Warsaw since 2008 is the monuments of the ghetto borders. The initiator was the Jewish Historical Institute and Monument Conservator of Warsaw. The most characteristic part of each of the 22 monuments are concrete slabs 25 cm wide with the inscription "ghetto wall", which, being placed on sidewalks and lawns, show the exact location of the boundaries of the Warsaw ghetto.

Conclusion

As we have shown, the memory of Jews and the Holocaust in post-war Minsk, Odessa and Warsaw could exist only on an unofficial or semi-official level. The return of discourse about the Holocaust and the tragedy of the Jewish people was only possible with the political transformation that began in the Eastern Bloc. During this period, we can observe not only a change in the official, state narrative, but also the emergence of new actors. Partly thanks to them, museums dedicated to the history of Jews have been established in all three cities, which was an important step towards the restoration of memory. There are also places of memory that fit into the urban environment. Of course, it would take a very long time to enumerate various initiatives and projects whose purpose is to preserve the history of the Jewish population, but in our essay we tried to focus on the most significant and interesting practices that reflect the essence of the changes that either have already taken place or are being implemented today.

